

Advent Lutheran Church
Choosing Thanks
November 24, 2024
Deuteronomy 8:7-18 / Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving is just a few days away. To prepare, I've been asking people to share some of their family traditions. Most of what I've heard so far focuses on the location of the gathering, the guest list, or the menu. And, in it isn't just what's on the menu; it is the specific person responsible for preparing those delicious dishes.

To be honest, however, more than a few people have provided less cheery responses. Thanksgiving is a great idea, but the actual event with real families isn't always that simple.

For some families, Thanksgiving just isn't the same any more ever since a specific family member passed from this life to the next. For others a gathering will not happen this year as the distance between people in the family is insurmountable, whether that distance is geographical or political. And for yet other families getting together will be hard because everyone will be on edge worrying that someone will break the unwritten rule that there are certain topics we just don't talk about.

Thanksgiving is all of these things and more. Whichever situation you are stepping in to this year, you will have the power to choose how you respond.

Today we are focusing on thankfulness and gratitude. It is our centering theme in worship and it is the reason that folks from Advent and from Adviento will gather in Luther Hall at 1:30 this afternoon to feast together. We've officially advertised that event as Friendsgiving, but, I'm calling it Churchgiving.

After a lifetime with Thanksgiving as a holiday, we've been invited to consider a more expansive view – perhaps you'd call it a more spacious perspective.

We've been invited to shift our November focus for giving thanks from being a family activity only to being for both families and friends. Now we have Thanksgiving for families and Friendsgiving for friends. So why not also Churchgiving for a special gathering of church family and friends.

And while I'm adding the suffix of giving to a variety of groups, let me add one more. I'm also glad to have celebrated Staffsgiving this week. On Monday I gathered at table with the staff of White Rock Center of Hope. On Wednesday I gathered at table with some of our staff here at Advent.

And then on Thursday I hosted a Friendsgiving meal in my home. Now I can't wait to celebrate Churchgiving with many of you and many from Adventio in a few hours.

All of this leads up to Thanksgiving when I'll gather with family in my sister's home just a few miles from here.

Gratitude abounds.

This morning our readings are the Thanksgiving Day lectionary passages. Since we will not be together then, I figured we should go there now.

The Old Testament reading provides a reminder the Israelites needed before entering the promised land and one we need before entering Thanksgiving week.

Remember God's provision. Call to mind the many stories of how God faithfully provided throughout their wilderness wandering and throughout your life path.

Remember humility. Recognize that this isn't a time for prideful boasts about your current blessings resulting from your own skillful efforts.

Remember to give thanks. Knowing who God is and how God has been, is, and will continue to be at work in the world you can approach all of life with gratitude.

Living a grateful life is transformative. It changes us for the better.

Did you know that research shows there are many health benefits to living with gratitude? Some of the many perks include better heart health, improved emotional well-being, lower levels of anxiety and depression, decreased panic attacks and phobias, reduced risk of alcoholism and substance abuse, and even longevity – yes, living a grateful life is associated with having a longer life.¹

Perhaps now I've captured your interest in living a grateful life.

While you ponder this path, let me invite you to add this morning's Gospel lesson to your decision-making matrix.

In this story, Jesus is doing what he often does – engaging people while traveling from one place to another. In this case he's in a borderland – a village located near the border of Galilee and Samaria. And here, in this place that doesn't fit in to what surrounds it, Jesus encounters 10 men who don't fit in at all. They've been isolated by their medical condition.

Jesus heals them from a distance, in effect saying, if you want to be healed then start walking. And as they expressed their faith by placing one foot in front of the other again and again the healing happened.

Ten men were healed that day, but only one returned to Jesus. Only one chose thanks. And this man was an outsider among outsiders; he was both a Samaritan and a leper.

Whether you are crying out to Jesus from afar as this man did or figuring out how to navigate the days ahead perhaps including some special or especially challenging meals known as Friendsgiving or Churchgiving or Thanksgiving, you alone decide the way you will show up. You have the power to choose thanks.

¹ Diana Butler Bass. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (HarperOne, 2018), loc. 637.

When I think about this whole idea of choosing thanks, I'm immediately aware it transcends a day or week or month on the calendar. And, yet, I'm also aware a grateful lifestyle usually begins with observing a single day of gratitude.

I find a prayer written by Diana Butler Bass that brings this idea to life particularly helpful. I shared it in full with the Fun for Lunch group earlier this week when they gathered at table. Now, as I close this sermon, I'll share the first part with you.

Let us pray.

GOD, there are many days we do not feel grateful.

When we are anxious or angry. When we feel alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world or with our neighbors. When the news is bleak and confusing. When there are threats, injustice, violence, and war.

We struggle to feel grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we choose gratitude. We choose to accept life as a gift from you, and as a gift from the unfolding work of all creation.

We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We choose to thank our ancestors, those who came before us, for their stories and struggles; we receive their wisdom as a continuing gift for today.

We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, accepting them for who they are.

We are thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand.

We choose to appreciate and care for our neighbors whatever our differences or how much we feel hurt or misunderstood by them.

We choose to open our hearts to those who dwell among us in the shadows of uncertainty and fear, recognizing their full dignity and humanity.

We choose to see the world as our shared commons, our home now and the legacy we will leave to the generations to come. God, this Thanksgiving, we do not give thanks. We choose it.²

Amen.

² Diana Butler Bass. "A Thanksgiving Prayer" – available at dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/a-thanksgiving-prayer